

# BEHIND THE RED CURTAIN



THE MAKING  
OF BAZ  
LUHRMANN'S  
MOULIN ROUGE



BY

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Baz and Nicole do the video splits.

## THE VISION

As flamboyantly theatrical and eclectic as the film itself, director (and co-writer) Baz Luhrmann had a vision of late 19th Century Paris and the famous Moulin Rouge that confounded conventional movie-making. The Moulin Rouge had to be more than just a setting for a love story, it also had to capture the mood of this century's end from the vantage point of the last.

Shifting the emphasis away from John Huston's *Moulin Rouge*, the 1952 bio-pic based on the turbulent life of artist Toulouse Lautrec, Luhrmann decided to base his story on the ancient legend of Orpheus, in which a young man descends into an underworld of lost souls. And so in Montmartre's notorious nightclub, we meet a young poet, Christian (Ewan McGregor) and watch the unfolding of his tortuous affair with Satine (Nicole Kidman), a denizen of the demi-monde.

## REMAKING PARIS

As in *Romeo + Juliet*, Luhrmann uses historical detail as a jump-off point rather than the governing aesthetic. The period was meticulously researched, but atmosphere trumped accuracy everytime. A simple recreation of the original Moulin Rouge would be almost impossible for a 21st Century audience to "read" because times and tastes have changed radically over the last hundred years. So, with production designer Catherine Martin, Luhrmann recreated the Moulin Rouge as it might have been perceived by those who were there at the time - a place bursting with energy, fuelled by hallucinogenic absinthe and suffused with sexual promise. If nothing else, a modern audience could easily recognise that.

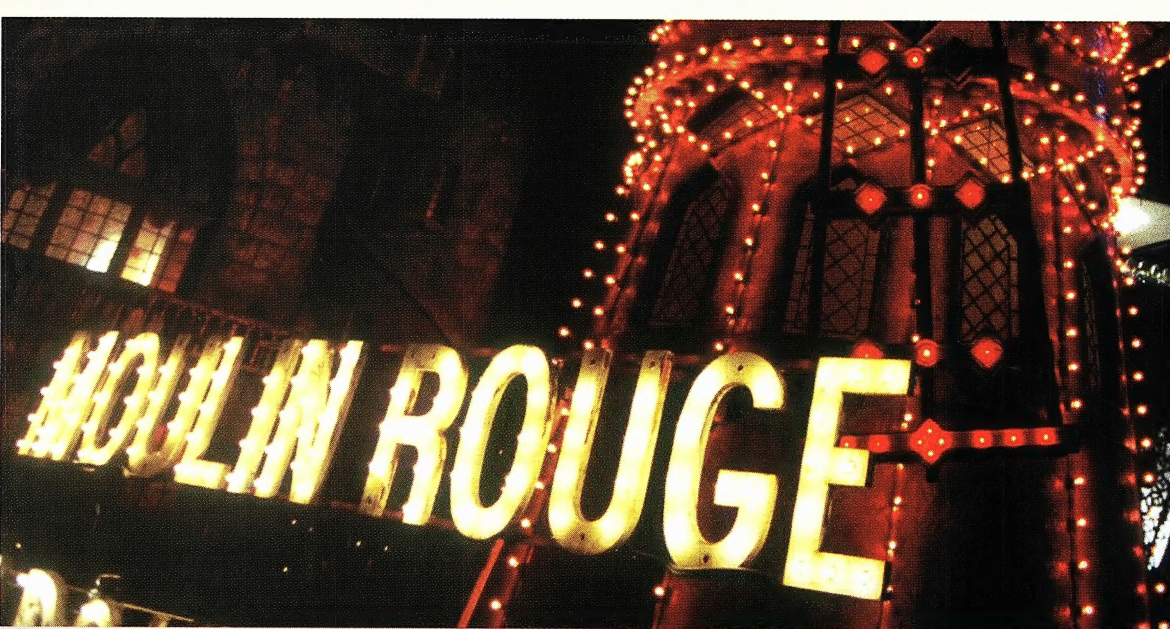
Over 6 sound stages on the Fox Studios lot in Sydney, Catherine Martin, art director Ian Gracie and veteran director of photography Don McAlpine worked closely to create a fantastical yet plausible world for characters who were themselves an amalgam of various movie references. In keeping with the self-conscious style of his first two films, Luhrmann supervised the creation a theatrical version of Paris that never really existed.

## LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Luhrmann's theatrical approach was reflected in the way *Moulin Rouge* was filmed. With the exception of the most complex set pieces, *Moulin Rouge* was shot with one camera. In an interview with movie website cinematographer.com, McAlpine explained his reasoning: "I've got a (CONTINUED)







## STRIKE UP THE BAND

The collision of effects and live action is matched by Luhrmann's anachronistic choice of music and choreographer John O'Connell's eclectic dance routines. Using the infamous Can-Can as a base, O'Connell overlays elements from classic Hollywood musicals, Argentinian tango, Hindu song and dance spectacles and the bump 'n' grind of the contemporary club scene. Equally innovative approaches were applied to the recording and lip-synching of the film's musical numbers. Each song was workshopped, rehearsed and recorded by the time the scene was shot although advances in digital recording allowed the option of either lip-synching to a pre-recorded vocal or singing a live vocal on set (to a guide track played on the soundstage) which was then married to the backing track.

## A NEW MUSICAL

In the same way that *Romeo + Juliet* succeeded in reinventing Shakespeare for today's young cinema audiences, *Moulin Rouge*'s modern take on the musical brings new life to a discredited genre. To take a form that was such a brilliant success in the '40s and '50s and make it acceptable — even inviting — to an audience is no mean feat.

Luhrmann's approach to filmmaking "is based on uncorrupted judgment," observed McAlpine. "There's an unwritten style manual for Hollywood films, but that book doesn't exist when you work with Baz. If he thinks it's best to put the camera at somebody's navel, looking up his or her nostrils, then we do. If it's best to have the camera looking straight down on a lead actor's bald patch, we do it. We failed with some ideas every day, but failure has always meant to me that you've just slightly exceeded your greatest limit. If failure happens in a genuine attempt, it's a wonderful thing."

(CONTINUED) theory that if the main camera is in exactly the right position, then the second camera can't be, because the right position is already occupied. I also find that using more than one camera dissipates energy - my own, the director's and the actors'. With one camera, the actor knows that that is his audience, whereas if the B-camera is alongside, it splits his attention. He thinks, 'One of these cameras has 50 million people behind it, but which one is it?'"

Exteriors were all shot on stage, painted backdrops were used extensively and McAlpine used unconventional rigging to translate for a modern audience the sense of wonder that Parisians might have experienced on seeing an electric light display for the first time. Lights were gelled with a Daylight Blue for the night scenes, which made for a deep, fantastically blue 'moonlight'. Historically accurate lighting was abandoned in favour of whatever looked best on set. For example, the tango scene (set to a raucous version of The Police's "Roxanne") is lit with follow spots, even though they had yet to be invented in 1899.

Moulin Rouge was shot in the 2.35:1 anamorphic format, McAlpine's favoured look. "My last 10 or 11 films have been anamorphic, and I love the format for many reasons," he explained to cinematographer.com. "One of them is that when the audience sits down in a theater, the screen just keeps going. They know they're not watching a TV movie. [Another reason is that] you can use a medium-sized lens to capture a performance, as well as a lot of the set design supporting the performance."

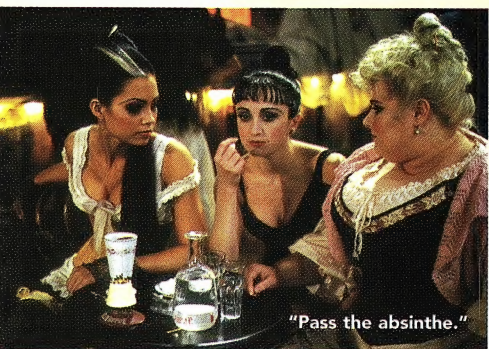
Visual effects supervisor Chris Godfrey's job was equally challenging. The original breakdowns called for 300 effect shots - an almost unheard of demand for a film without spaceships or car chases. On top of that, Luhrmann wanted a film in which the digital effects retained a "hand made" look and quoted the camera moves and conventions of early filmmakers. "We live in a world where our audiences are not only aware but profoundly bored of the perfection of digital magic", said Luhrmann in the book that accompanied the release of the film. "It is an oddity with this project", "that we spent so much money trying to make things less perfect."

Godfrey supervised a team of computer artists from Sydney's Animal Logic studio to create a digital Paris in two-dimensions which can be morphed into the three-dimensional model of the Montmartre neighbourhood flown over by McAlpine's motion control camera. In one long shot, the audience is swept from the bourgeois suburbs to Christian's low-rent garret.

Luhrmann didn't initially intend to include any outdoor shots of Paris, but as production progressed, the lack of exteriors was lending the project a claustrophobic look that began to overwhelm the spirit of the film. Without the extra money or space to actually build a full-size model of the Moulin Rouge and its trademark windmill sails, scale models that were never intended to be shot in close-up were brought to the fore and shot with motion control cameras. Thanks to the overall theatricality of the design, a choice dictated largely by budget constraints actually enhanced the fantasy element of the film.

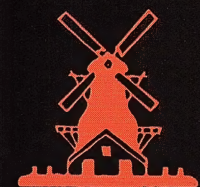


Classically modern.





## THE MAKING OF THE MOULIN ROUGE DVD



# SPECTACULAR SPECTACULAR

The day after the Australian premiere of *Moulin Rouge* visual effects producer **Holly Radcliffe** got a call from the general manager of Bazmark (Baz Luhrmann's production company) and Catherine Martin to come in and "have a chat about a few bits and pieces that they had to get sorted for the DVD." Radcliffe should have known better. The few bits and pieces turned into a spectacular double disc *Moulin Rouge* DVD and special editions of Luhrmann's other Red Curtain films, *Romeo + Juliet* and *Strictly Ballroom*. As Radcliffe says, "Baz doesn't do anything by halves. If he's going to do it he'll do it the best he can."

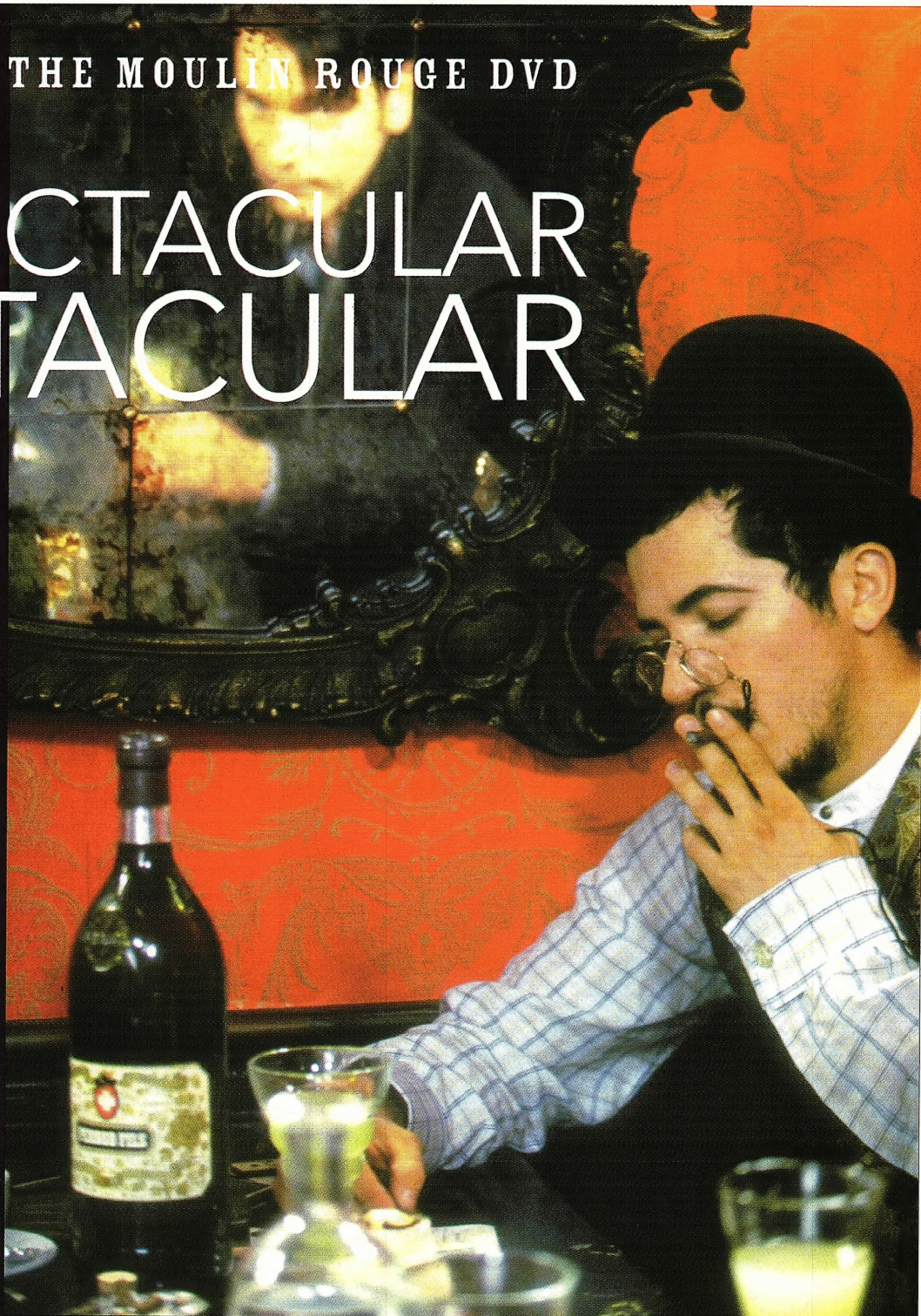
Though unfamiliar with DVD it didn't take Luhrmann long to catch on to the medium's potential. "He really feels it's an extension of the storytelling process," says Radcliffe. "In the *Moulin Rouge* packaging he [Luhrmann] refers to a DVD in which David Lean describes how he achieved a particular effect, Baz sat back and went, 'I get it.' It extended his experience of watching that particular film. It reinforced his love of films and filmmaking and that's the thing that drove him most."

Racing against time Radcliffe and her team set about assembling the materials for the *Moulin Rouge* DVD. "We didn't feel that within the time that we had we could make a documentary that would represent Baz's vision well." Instead they assembled material in galleries. The result reflects Luhrmann's bower bird approach to filmmaking. "We thought that it would be best to try and show as much of the material in as rawer fashion as possible. Ultimately I think it's a bit like the way Baz made *Moulin Rouge*. I hate to use the word 'hotch-potch' but when you watch the production that is what it is. It's a collage."

Music licensing gave Radcliffe her biggest headache. "Assembling the extraneous materials was a clearance nightmare because of the music. When Anton Monstead the music supervisor says [on the DVD] of the love medley piece that they literally bent music licensing rules — they did. It's incredible how constrained you are with lines from other songs. Naively we thought we could use the songs that had already been used in the film in other contexts but we couldn't. It's quite a heart wrenching process." Nonetheless Radcliffe has managed to gather together some revealing footage of the filmmakers at work.

Radcliffe is most proud of the DVD's extended dance sequences. "A lot of those dance sequences they had to be edited to tell the story. Unfortunately you just can't have four minutes of Can-Can in the middle of the film." But you can-can on DVD.

*Moulin Rouge Special Edition DVD will be released on December 5.*



## CUE THE MUSIC

THE MOULIN ROUGE SPECIAL EDITION DVD IS PACKED FULL OF SPECIAL FEATURES. HERE'S A TASTE.

Apart from the film disc one features an audio commentary by Baz Luhrmann, designer Catherine Martin and cinematographer Don McAlpine, a second commentary by Baz Luhrmann and co-writer Craig Pearce as well as branched footage which takes a behind the scenes look at various settings and scenes including the opening effects shot, the Windmill exterior, the Elephant Love Medley and the Hindi Spectacular.

Disc Two comes with the HBO Featurette, "The Making of Moulin Rouge" (which you've already got thanks to us), eight galleries of behind the scenes footage (The Stars, The Story, The Cutting Room, The Dance, The Music, Multi-Angle, The Design, Marketing) as well as a record setting fifteen hilarious easter eggs (including "Nicole Goes Down on the Duke" and "Make-Up Artist Dusts Nipples") which have to be seen to be believed. Highlights of the second disc include the multi-angle dance sequences and footage of the pre-shoot choreography.

